

## THE BAMBINO

**N**O. That isn't mine. It's a thing of Frances Archdale's, her sister-in-law, Mrs. Jack Archdale. You know the man I mean. He buys pictures.

You think it's odd he didn't buy this one? Wait till you've heard the story.

I've seen her sitting like that, like a Flemish Madonna: sloping knees, and the naked slip of the child standing between her hands; her hands half holding, half adoring. He must have seen her—and her hands. They're in the centre of the picture, large and white and important; as if Frances had known.

You'd have thought it wasn't possible to hate a woman so unfortunate as she was. She ought to have been immune. Yet I believe I'd have hated her even if she hadn't smashed that incomparable old Chinese bowl poor Lawrence left me. But no doubt that began it: the sight of the precious thing slipping through those large awkward hands that were always in movement, always seizing and dropping things, the long fingers playing; and her husky drawl: "I'm so sorry, Mr. Simp-son." She sent me a blue and white bowl from Liberty's the next day, and seemed to think that, if anything, that left me in her debt.

On the whole, she was let off easily, because, with all her multiplied misfortunes, she never faced the full implications of disaster. She was too complacent.

I remember the season when Jack Archdale brought her to town and we all raved about her, his slender Flemish Madonna, with her long, slender shoulders, her long, slender, skim-milk face, her long, slender nose that overhung her upper lip that overhung the lower one that overhung the soft round of her chin sloping away into her neck. And the thin gold rain of hair on her cheeks, loosened from the two sleek bands, untidily. There was something so helplessly yielding and retreating about that profile that you weren't prepared for her obstinacy, that obstinacy which—

Well, it was the helplessness that caught Jack Archdale.

The first time I saw her, at their house-warming, she was unfortunate; standing on a priceless Persian rug and pouring claret-cup over it from the glass she tilted, following Archdale with her pale, moony eyes. Her name was Adela.

He adored her in a funny, abject way, sitting dumb (you couldn't talk to Adela) and staring at her. When the baby came he adored the baby; they both adored it, and they were both jealous of the adoration. You'd come in and find them quarrelling about which was to hold it. He'd be saying, "Give him to me, I want him." And she, with her queer drawl, "You might let me have him, Jack. He's more mine than yours."

And he'd shout back at her, "He isn't." Not ragging, you know, but quite fierce and serious.

He talked about the Bambino half the time; he'd bring the conversation round to him from anywhere. I remember dining with them one night before they left London. (They were always asking me because of Frances.) He'd bought a picture of mine that

year and he thought it funny to say, "Roly doesn't come to see us, he comes to see his old picture."

She sat there, stretching her white goose neck to get out her drawl. "Aren't you aw-w-fly glad when pee-ple buy your pictures?"

He tried to head her off. "He isn't. He feels as I should if somebody bought the Bambino."

And she went blundering on. "He knows it's safe with us. He knows it's all in the family."

I said he didn't know anything of the sort. Frances had checked me the week before, and I was still bitter about it and afraid of Adela because she had an unpleasant way of throwing Frances at me. (You summed up Adela when you said she had no tact.) I could see Archdale making signs to her, but she did it again with her lazy air of not being able to help it.

"What are you going to do with yourself this winter?" The poor woman couldn't see she hadn't changed the subject. She was like that.

In the smoke-room he worked round to his subject again. I'd asked him how he liked his country house, and he said, "It'll be a jolly place for the Bambino to grow up in. And to step into when I'm dead."

"It's all very well," he said. "He's delicious to kiss and all that, and he'll never be prettier than he is now. But I wish one could skip fifteen years or so. I want the Bambino grown up, now. I can't wait twenty years to know what he's going to do, the sort of things he'll say, what his mind'll be like. He's got no end of a mind, Roly, already. At thirteen months. You wouldn't believe it."

"Women are funny," he said. "Adela doesn't want him to grow up. She'd keep him a Bambino always if she had her way."

I can see him with that queer, ironic face of his, gripping his old briar pipe with his teeth while he smiled, thinking of the things the Bambino would do when he grew up.

It was five years before I got the rest of the story; and what I couldn't make out, what I couldn't even have tried to get from either of them, Frances told me.

I'd lost sight of them somehow all that time; then one day I met Jack Archdale at Frances's, and he motored us both down to that place of theirs in Buckinghamshire. I can't say I enjoyed the run. Archdale was a sulky, nervous driver. He stopped dead to change his gear, and he took his corners badly. That wasn't like him; he used to be so cool and careful and efficient, and I remember wondering why on earth he was so jumpy and why he sulked so now. He didn't even rise when I asked after the blessed Bambino.

And we weren't in his house five minutes before he let us see that he'd grown a temper. He hadn't the ghost of one to start with; that I can swear to. I supposed it was the fruit of seven years' marriage with a goose-faced Madonna.

She hadn't changed, except that she seemed much more glad to see us than she used to be; so glad, in fact, that it struck me she was positively afraid to be left alone with Archdale and his temper.

I expected every minute that he'd say, "Where's the Bambino?" I said it myself at last, to create a diversion.

Adela seemed gratified, and went out to get him, and Archdale got up and stood by the window with his back to us, pretending to stare at things in his garden. Frances looked round at him uneasily, and I supposed then that he and Adela had quarrelled about the kiddy. It was what they would do. I began to long for the Bambino to appear and break the tension. I think I expected an excited, dramatic entry; I reminded myself that the Bambino was now five years old.

So I wasn't prepared to see Adela come back with a baby in her arms—a baby too young to display excitement, too young to talk. It could only make queer, immature noises.

I said: "What? A new Bambino? And you never told me!"

Adela was smiling stupidly, and Archdale kept his station by the window. The new baby looked as if it didn't see any of us. There was something odd, something morbid about its detachment, and I touched its soft magnolia cheek to feel if it were real.

"I can see it's new," I said, "but— isn't it awfully like the old Bambino?"

"It is the old Bambino. There isn't any other."

She put it to the ground. Then I saw.

She had got her way. The Bambino would be a baby all its life. Its mind had stopped dead at fourteen months.

Archdale turned, as if he had got up courage at last to stand with her and see her through. He had braced himself to look at the Bambino.

It couldn't walk; it sort of toddled, with a series of little headlong, shambling rushes, wagging its head till the heavy, bulging forehead swung forward and upset its balance. It hadn't sense to grab at things and save itself.

When it fell Archdale rushed to it with a sudden gasping cry. He held it up in his arms, turning with it to Frances and me sternly, as if he defied us to see anything in it but its beauty.

Oh, yes, it was beautiful. It isn't true that idiots always have vacant faces. The Bambino's face was full, full of a heavy, sleeping mournfulness—mournfulness carved into the exquisite, morbid bow of his little mouth, into the straight, pure line of his nose, and fixed in his black, drowsy eyes. But an unutterable, not human, mournfulness, without any reminiscence or foreboding. Animal—the unmoving sadness of a cat's eyes would be near it, only that has something human in it.

Adela began talking. "He is a little backward. But I tell Jack it's because his mind's too big for his body. He's going to be something wonderful. You've only got to look at his face to see he's thinking." She really thought that.

I believe even Jack thought then it wasn't quite hopeless. He had theories; tried experiments; took infinite precautions. He had the nurseries moved to the ground floor so that Adela shouldn't carry him up and down stairs, and a gate put at the bottom of the stairs so that he shouldn't crawl up and fall down them. The day nursery was hung with glittering bells, and glass prisms that shook in the sun and sent rainbow patches darting about the walls and ceiling.

And there was a peal of bells he used to ring. He thought if you could once catch the Bambino's attention you might draw his mind out of its hiding-place. They gave him yards and yards of paper ribbons, pink and green and blue, to play with. The Bambino had dark days when he sat on his big mackintosh mattress like a porcelain idol, doing nothing but wag his head. And he had bright days when he seized the paper ribbons and tore them to bits. And days of surpassing brilliance when he shambled along the garden walks and tore down Jack's delphiniums and gladioli from their borders. His progress was marked by a trail of decaying red and scarlet spears.

Frances told me how it happened. Yes; it was Adela; Adela's hands that couldn't hold things; Adela's obstinacy. He had told her not to carry the Bambino up and down stairs. So she did it. The hall stairs were very long and steep, very narrow at the turn. She was coming down them with the Bambino on one arm and the tail of her gown on the other. He caught sight of Archdale in the hall, and was struggling to get to him . . .

Adela doesn't see the connection between that fall and his "backwardness." She doesn't see yet what's happening to Archdale. She doesn't see why they have separate rooms. Nor why he was terrified the other night when she came in with the big lamp in her hands flaring. He jumped up and took it from her, and she stood there splaying her hands and smiling while he growled at her: "You—"

He didn't say it. It was the one word his mind shied at, the word you hoped he'd never have to hear. If you'll believe me, she positively shrieked it. "Really, Jack, anybody'd think I was an idiot!"

He looked at her, and Frances and I looked at each other. We'd both seen the same thing, only I didn't know what it was till Frances told me.

"He can't help it," she said. "He's afraid of everything . . . She wants to have more babies, and he won't let her. He simply couldn't stand seeing her hold them."

I said it was rather cruel; and Frances said, "Oh yes, cruel. That's the awful thing, how it's changed him."

I suggested that it hadn't changed Adela, and she put it to me. "Could I see anything changing Adela?"

I couldn't. After all I was sorrier for him, and I said so. I knew Frances didn't like Adela.

But she shook her head, and said, "I'm not sure. He knows the worst and she doesn't. It'll be awful when she sees it. She can't go on pretending when the Bambino . . . Besides, she may have to see what you've seen."

"And that is—?"

She stuck it straight in front of me. "Why, that he hates her."

I suppose that's what I saw.

I wish Frances would take the damned thing away. But she's afraid of it. She's got in too much: the sweet, milk-white, fatuous beauty. And the hands, the terrible, imbecile hands; the insecurity.

MAY SWICLAIN.